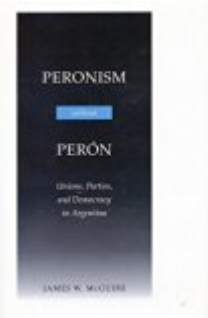


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James W. McGuire. *Peronism without Peron: Unions, Parties, and Democracy in Argentina*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. xvii + 388 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2831-7.

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Peronism is, without question, the favorite subject of historians of contemporary Argentina. Since 1945, hundreds of books and articles have been devoted to examining this political movement from the most diverse angles. Indeed, the multiple interpretations of Peronism ventured in the past fifty years would in themselves constitute a major source for an intellectual history of Argentines and foreign “Argentinologists.” This fascination is quite understandable: Peronism has endured as the main political force of this society. More importantly, its history has been marked by contradictions that challenge even the most astute analyst. One of the main paradoxes of Peronism seems obvious after reading the book under review: Peron died twenty-four years ago, leaving behind a political force that has successfully survived the absence of its charismatic leader and which forms an essential part of Argentina’s healthy democracy. Despite this, Peronism is still perceived as an obstacle to democracy.

This book examines a topic at the heart of all debate about Peronism and democracy: that of the internal relationship between the charismatic leader (Peron, and more recently Menem), unions, and the Peronist party. In focusing on the power of unions in the Peronist movement, McGuire adds his solid contribution to a long list of works on the subject. Unlike most of these authors, however, McGuire’s analysis is strictly that of a political scientist, the discipline from which he draws all of the theoretical framework of his arguments. Likewise, the author’s main concern is a political one: the link between this balance of power within the Peronist universe and the health of Argentine democracy.

The book’s thesis is clearly stated on the very first

page: “[that] deliberate actions by Peronism’s personalistic leaders, together with turf battles among its trade unionists, have undermined attempts by secondary Peronist figures to institutionalize its party structures, and that the failure of these party-building projects has impeded the consolidation of democracy in the broader political system” (p. vii).

This is, of course, a well-traveled path—the denunciation of the personalistic, anti-democratic nature of Peronism is as old as Peronism itself, and Peron himself has repeatedly (and justifiably) been blamed for it. In fact, this idea has been at the core of the wave of works on Peronism conceived in the context of the transition from military rule to democracy in 1983 where the electoral defeat of Peronism triggered a severe questioning of its compatibility with democracy. McGuire’s work seems to belong to this generation of social scientists whose analyses of Peronism have provided valuable, thoroughly researched insights into specific aspects of this political movement to support broader critical conclusions about Peronism that fit into an already existing tradition of interpretation.

McGuire’s analysis focuses on the equilibrium of power between three key internal elements of Peronism: the charismatic leader, unions and their leaders, and the Peronist Party. His purpose is to show how important attempts to strengthen Peronist institutions by strengthening the Peronist Party—especially in 1966 by Vandor and in 1988 by Cafiero—failed due to the opposition of both Peron and Menem, along with that of union leaders who needed their support to win political battles within their unions or the CGT. In this sense, the book is very much the story of a failure and the author conveys an underlying sense of regret over these missed opportunities.

On the way to making his case, McGuire also provides us with a balanced, nuanced description of the background for these events. The broad chronological scope (from 1943 to the present), the importance of all the actors involved, as well as the rigor of the narrative make this book a good political history of Peronism, useful for classroom discussion. The absurdity of the Argentine political scene after 1955, when Peron was in his eighteen-year exile and every political equation revolved around the uncertain fate of Peronism, is rendered in all its force. We also find a useful examination of the nature of Augusto Vandor's leadership in the context of this peculiar political atmosphere, although one wonders to what extent his leadership would have been different from that of Peron's had his party-building project succeeded.

This reviewer has only minor critical comments on what is on the whole a very accurate portrait of the Argentine political scene of the last fifty years. First, the Catholic Church did not, as McGuire contends, oppose the women's suffrage legislation (p. 73). More importantly, the care the author takes in accounting for Peronism's internal divisions seems absent from a somewhat simplistic description of the anti-Peronist camp of the 1950s (p. 77). Finally, in order to illustrate the wild levels of corruption in the Menem administration, we are provided with a list of charges leveled against Peronist governors. However, the author neglects to mention the two Radical governors, Masaccessi and Angeloz, who left office accused of very similar crimes.

The sections where the specific cases of power struggle are discussed are particularly enlightening, both be-

cause of the information provided and the quality of the analysis. The reader will learn much about the history of Peronist unions as well as the political role of unions in any society. At times, however, the detail provided can be overwhelming. To make his point about the logic of political conflict within unions—inspired, oddly enough, by a political theory of international relations—the author recreates power struggles within unions to a degree of detail that may be hard on the non-specialized reader. For example, in the section about factions in Peronist union leadership between 1963 and 1966 (p. 126), one spends nine pages reading about subtle (and sometimes hypothetical) ideological differences between leaders, in order to arrive at a conclusion that was quite obvious from the start: that these differences did not matter and that the issues at stake lay elsewhere.

Nevertheless, these descriptions always fit into a broader context of an interesting, rigorous interpretation. McGuire's analysis has the added virtue of containing a comparative perspective, all the more valuable because such perspective has been so rare in the Argentine-centered bibliography of Peronism. At every step of the argument, this insightful, solid book reminds us that this "unique" movement shares much with its contemporaries in other countries.

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